

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.

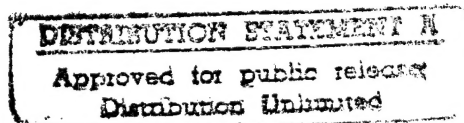
**OPERATIONAL ART IN THE TET OFFENSIVE  
A NORTH VIETNAMESE PERSPECTIVE**


by

Joseph W. Swaykos  
Commander, United States Navy

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.



Signature 

14 June 1996

Paper directed by Captain G.W. Jackson  
Chairman, Joint Military Operations Department

19960815 124

DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 1

## REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1. Report Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
2. Security Classification Authority:			
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:			
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.			
5. Name of Performing Organization: JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
6. Office Symbol: C		7. Address: NAVAL WAR COLLEGE 686 CUSHING ROAD NEWPORT, RI 02841-1207	
8. Title (Include Security Classification): Operational Art in the Tet Offensive - A North Vietnamese Perspective (U)			
9. Personal Authors: Joseph W. Swaykos CDR, USN			
10. Type of Report: FINAL		11. Date of Report: 20 May 1996	
12. Page Count: 22			
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.			
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: Vietnam, Tet, Offensive, Operational Art, Giap, North Vietnamese Army, Vietcong			
15. Abstract: The Tet Offensive (Vietnam War) provides an excellent example of the successful application of operational art when viewed from the North Vietnamese perspective. Operational leadership was exercised by General Vo Nguyen Giap as he assured that the offensive served as an extension of North Vietnamese strategic objectives and desired end state. Giap developed and executed an operational design that fully accounted for the centers of gravity and critical strengths and weaknesses of his forces and his enemy's. While he suffered tactical defeats, Giap achieved nearly all of his operational objectives and his desired operational end state - delivery of a military shock to his enemy. The offensive ultimately lead to achievement of North Vietnam's strategic objective and desired end state.			
16. Distribution / Availability of Abstract:	Unclassified  X	Same As Rpt	DTIC Users
17. Abstract Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
18. Name of Responsible Individual: CHAIRMAN, JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
19. Telephone: 841- <del>6461</del> 6461		20. Office Symbol: C	

## **Abstract**

The Tet Offensive, conducted by the North Vietnamese army and Vietcong under the leadership of General Vo Nguyen Giap was a major turning point in the Vietnam War and serves as an excellent example of the application of operational art. By conducting a surprise, expansive, and violent offensive, General Giap and his forces dealt a shocking military blow to the world's premier military power, a shock that attacked the operational and strategic centers of gravity of the United States. The impact of the Tet Offensive ultimately lead to achievement of the strategic objective and desired end state of North Vietnam, erosion of popular support of the war in the United States and independence for Vietnam, respectively.

General Giap applied the principles of operational art in achieving his operational and strategic objectives. His operational leadership and experience enabled him to protect his strategic center of gravity, a unified Vietnamese people. He developed and executed an effective operational design that exploited his strengths and minimized his vulnerabilities while minimizing the effectiveness of his enemy's strengths and attacking his enemy's vulnerabilities. In short, he knew his enemy better than his enemy knew him.

Although General Giap suffered heavy casualties and lost tactical engagements in the Tet Offensive, he was successful on operational and strategic levels of war. The success of the Tet Offensive directly contributed to the withdrawal of United States' forces from Vietnam and ultimately, Vietnam's independence.

## Thesis

The armed forces of North Vietnam which fought United States and South Vietnamese forces in the Vietnam War (known as the Second Indochina War by the North Vietnamese) were made up of two components: a regular or traditional army (North Vietnamese Army - NVA) and an insurgent force, the Vietcong. During the major North Vietnamese operational campaign of the war, the 1968 Tet Offensive, both forces were employed under the operational leadership of General Vo Nguyen Giap in an attempt to strike a shocking operational blow to U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. The offensive resulted in a series of tactical defeats for the North Vietnamese however in an operational and strategic sense, the campaign was a success. General Giap's Tet Offensive achieved the majority of his operational objectives which lead to achievement of his desired operational end state. He also achieved the North Vietnamese strategic objective and desired end states - erosion of popular support of the Vietnam War in the United States and establishing an independent Vietnam, respectively. General Giap's application of the principles of operational art was a success.

## The Relevance of Tet

Before analyzing the application of operational art from the North Vietnamese perspective during the Tet Offensive, the question arises as to the significance of the offensive in relation to the war in Vietnam. Was Tet operationally significant? Was it an operational campaign? The answer to both questions is an unqualified 'yes'. Tet was an operational campaign as it was composed of simultaneous, or near simultaneous tactical assaults on numerous cities and towns throughout the entire expanse of South Vietnam, an area that is approximately 800 miles long and, at its widest points, some 100-150 miles wide. A map detailing South Vietnam is in appendix A.

As to its significance in relation to the Vietnam War, Tet proved to be an operational and strategic turning point as it attacked U.S. centers of gravity at

operational, and strategic levels of war. Operationally, the offensive ultimately led to the adoption of a defensive posture by U.S. forces including the cessation of bombing of North Vietnam and the prevention of further increases in U.S. force strength. It also showed the South Vietnamese forces to be incapable of defeating Giap's forces without the support of the massive U.S. war machine. This undermined the U.S. concept of turning the fight over to the South Vietnamese Army (Army of the Republic of Vietnam - ARVN) known as Vietnamization.

Perhaps most significantly the Tet Offensive had a major strategic impact as its power, ferocity, devastation, and speed revealed a fighting spirit and strength heretofore recognized but publicly downplayed by U.S. military leaders. This revelation began a rapid erosion of confidence of the people of the United States in their military and government and an erosion of popular support of the war.

#### Analysis

**Operational leadership.** In analyzing the application of operational art principles, it is essential to examine the operational leadership traits of the leader applying these principles. In other words, were his strategies and operational decisions well founded actions and extensions of national policy objectives, or just luck? A brief introduction to the leader of North Vietnamese forces in the Tet Offensive, General Vo Nguyen Giap, will clearly answer this question.

General Giap was born in 1912 in An Xa village, Quang Binh province in Annam (Indochina), coincidentally the birthplace of Ho Chi Minh the President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and Giap's immediate superior.<sup>1</sup> Giap attended high school in the city of Hue and continued his education at the University of Hanoi where he was awarded a "licence en droit" or license to practice law in 1937.<sup>2</sup> Giap became a high school history teacher in Hanoi where he joined the Communist Party (1937). His wife (Minh Kai), an ardent Communist Party supporter, was arrested by the French shortly thereafter as the Communist Party was outlawed in

French colonies. She was sentenced to hard labor and died in prison in 1943.<sup>3</sup> Minh Kai's death inflamed Giap's personal anti-colonist sentiments and commitment to an evolving North Vietnamese desire for independence.

Vo Nguyen Giap, who had been active politically through his years as a teacher, first met Ho Chi Minh in 1941 at a meeting of the Indochina Communist Party when Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh (Viet-minh), or the league for Independence for Vietnam, was formed.<sup>4</sup> Giap apparently was assigned responsibility for forming and organizing the Communist military force of Vietnam at that time. Giap's rise to military preeminence is not well chronicled although it appears as though he was the best man for the job, at least from Ho's perspective. His military training was academic as well as practical. Giap's students referred to him as "The General" as he was a student of Napoleon and had an innate ability to discuss his strategies in great detail.<sup>5</sup>

Giap is also said to have trained with Mao Tse Tung's communists in China while other accounts indicate that he had trained with the U.S. Army, also in China.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless Giap recruited and trained the first regular unit of Viet-minh forces - a 34 man platoon which saw its first combat action against French forces in December 1944. The platoon was described by Giap as follows:

We forgot that we were only 34 human beings equipped with rudimentary weapons. We imagined ourselves to be an army of steel, not to be defeated by any force, ready to destroy the enemy. Confidence, eagerness prevailed.<sup>7</sup>

By August 1945, Giap's force had grown to an Army of 10,000 as the Japanese surrender concluded World War II in the Pacific.<sup>8</sup>

How Giap was able to recruit such a large force so quickly is not clear but it does highlight one of two keys to his exercise of operational art and operational leadership - he clearly understood that his strategic center of gravity was a unified people of Vietnam, united by a common purpose of gaining their independence. Not only the rank and file of his rapidly expanding Army, but all of the people of Vietnam. In Giap's words, the key to

winning a war is that "...the great majority of the people must support, or be in sympathy with such a movement."<sup>9</sup>

Giap maintained support within the military through training with significant emphasis on the idea that the Army is composed of all elements of the people of Vietnam fighting to protect their interests. He also stressed discipline and conducted political indoctrination and training which he held to be the most important of all training.<sup>10</sup> Giap's popular support outside of the military was maintained by his understanding of, and ability to effectively communicate, the aims of the revolutionary movement, perhaps a reflection of his skills as a teacher.<sup>11</sup> Giap's writings continually emphasized the importance of the people in achieving an independent Vietnam, the importance of maintaining an active concern for the welfare of the people, and the importance of popular understanding of the 'why' of the Viet-minh movement - that Vietnamese life was more than a life of "inescapable poverty and servitude".<sup>12</sup>

The second key element of Giap's application of operational art and leadership was his awareness and practical application of the concept of the primacy of politics. He personified the role of the military as an extension of politics as he served concurrently as Commander-in-Chief of the People's Army and as Deputy Premier of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> Giap, as previously stated, recognized the value of understanding the political-military relationship by the North Vietnamese army and dedicated nearly fifty percent of soldier training time to political education.<sup>14</sup> By serving as an interface between national policy and military strategy and operations, General Giap epitomized the definition of operational leadership.<sup>15</sup>

By rallying and maintaining popular support, emphasizing and applying the principle of primacy of politics and the importance of achieving national objectives for the mutual benefit of the people throughout his operational design, Giap was able to maintain his strategic center of gravity - a unified people with a unity of purpose and a

well defined strategic end state - an independent Vietnam. His strategies and operational decisions were founded upon extensive political and military training, not on luck.

**Operational design.** General Giap's operational design was heavily influenced by the theories of Mao and personal experience. Mao's operational approach was designed to allow an inferior armed force to defeat a force with superior resources.<sup>16</sup> Mao developed a three stage campaign plan consisting of defense, equilibrium, and counteroffensive. Mao simplified his theory into a single phrase, "Fight when you can win, run when you cannot."<sup>17</sup> Giap too compacted his operational design by stating, "Is the enemy strong? One avoids him. Is he weak? One attacks."<sup>18</sup> He emphasized as essential elements for attack careful planning (phasing, branches, sequels, reserve), preparation (application of force vs. the enemy's operational center of gravity, intelligence gathering, and deception), proper timing (sequencing) of events and maintaining a high combative spirit by remaining focused on operational objectives and desired end state.<sup>19</sup>

As General Giap developed his operational design of the Tet Offensive, he incorporated operational combat experience and lessons learned from successes and failures. Giap's operational experience came against an established, experienced military force - that of France in the First Indochina War. Giap however made severe mistakes in fighting the French. In the battle of Vinh Yen (1950-51) General Giap lost between 6000 and 8000 men by underestimating his enemy, failing to plan a coherent campaign and failing to mass his army's strength.<sup>20</sup> At the end of the First Indochina War though Giap defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu through an articulately phased and sequenced employment of regular and guerilla forces. He was about to repeat the process with the Tet Offensive. U.S. and South Vietnamese leadership failed to recognize this and that General Giap had advanced his strategy in the Second Indochina War (Vietnam War) to what was analogous to Mao's third phase of war fighting - the counteroffensive.



As the Tet Offensive lie in the offing, some fifteen years later, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces were not about to face a novice warrior, they were to be engaged by an accomplished general. Giap learned well from his previous failures and had become adept in applying operational art in an unconventional war. He knew his enemy and his enemy's strengths, weaknesses, and centers of gravity.

**Operational objectives and desired end state.** The analysis of the employment of operational design in the Tet Offensive by General Giap continues with a review of his operational objectives and desired end state. Giap's operational objectives were derived from North Vietnam's strategic objective of eroding popular support for the Vietnam War among the citizens of the United States. Giap's operational objectives were to incite a popular revolution against the government of South Vietnam, weaken to the point of collapse the armed forces of South Vietnam, interrupt U.S. pacification (counterinsurgency) and Vietnamization efforts, inflict heavy casualties on U.S. forces while forcing them to adopt a defensive strategy, and demonstrate the North Vietnamese resolve and ability to conduct strikes against major conventional enemy targets (cities, military and political headquarters, airports, etc.).<sup>21</sup> The latter objective perhaps more than all the other operational objectives taken as a whole would, if achieved, allow Giap to attain his desired operational end state, that being the creation of a "shock" to the U.S. and South Vietnamese armed forces, governments, and people, a shock resulting from a sudden, surprise, ambitious all-out attack by a force that, from the U.S. perspective, had long passed its culminating point. Giap wanted to send his enemy a clear message that he had not reached his culminating point and was prepared to endure the rigors of a continued protracted effort, a war of attrition.

The question arises as to whether Giap had as either an operational objective or desired end state the final defeat of U.S. and South Vietnamese forces through the Tet Offensive. The answer is no. According to General Giap, "We were not strong enough

to drive out a half million American troops, but that wasn't our aim.<sup>22</sup> In an interview held shortly after the Tet Offensive Giap stated:

...the Spring 1968 offensive revealed abruptly to the Americans that the Vietnamese people do not give up easily and that their military strength has not been in any way impaired by the United States' aggression...gone for good is the hope of annihilating the Liberation forces. Gone are the pacification projects...the United States troops had to entrench themselves on the defensive, blocked in their positions.<sup>23</sup>

In order to achieve these operational objectives and desired end state, Giap decided to adopt a different operational design as he progressed from Mao's theoretical phase II to phase III (counteroffensive) of the Vietnam War. While it is tempting to label a campaign with a specific strategy, Giap did not view it as such. He stated, "For us...there is never a single strategy. Ours is always a synthesis, simultaneously military, political and diplomatic - which is why, quite clearly, the offensive had multiple objectives."<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, Giap's operational design had shifted from a predominantly insurgent type of warfare in the countryside of South Vietnam to a more conventional warfare focused on cities. His operational idea was to lure U.S. forces away from centers of population and employ diversionary attacks to inflict heavy casualties then follow with coordinated assaults on these, now weakly defended (by South Vietnamese troops), cities and towns, and continue inflicting casualties while sending fear and terror through the civilian populace and local governments which would lead to a popular uprising against the South Vietnamese government.<sup>25</sup> In order to conceptualize the grand scope of Giap's operational design, one must consider that the Tet Offensive struck 36 of 44 provincial capitals, 5 of 6 major cities, 64 district capitals, and 50 hamlets stretching over the 800 mile length of South Vietnam - within 24 hours.<sup>26</sup> In Saigon alone, major facilities attacked included the U.S. embassy, Tan Son Nhut airport, the South Vietnamese presidential palace, and the headquarters of the South Vietnamese armed forces general

staff. Giap's operational design was clearly consistent with his operational objectives and desired end state.

**Centers of gravity.** In developing this operational design General Giap had acquired a clear understanding of his centers of gravity and those of his adversary. Strategically, the North Vietnamese center of gravity was the people of Vietnam (north and south). Without the people of the north supporting the war directly as soldiers and as sources of material and support, and the people in the south providing cover, food, ammunition, and intelligence, the Vietnamese 'War of Independence' would have never succeeded.

Operationally, the North Vietnamese center of gravity was General Giap. The General was able to train, motivate, lead, and integrate, an armed force of regulars and an insurgent force of Vietcong against the strongest conventional military force in the world. Moreover, he was able to establish and maintain popular support thereby protecting his strategic center of gravity by continually promoting Vietnamese unity of purpose. Giap ensured that the military kept political objectives in mind while the populace was kept well informed as to the military objectives and how they served as extensions of popular objectives. In a 1967 interview (pre-Tet) Giap stated:

Guerilla activities and large scale combat are coordinated, help each other, and encourage each other to grow. They are also coordinated closely with the political struggle in order to win victories in both the military and political fields and thus lead the resistance to final victory.<sup>27</sup>

General Giap recognized early on in the war the strategic and operational centers of gravity of the United States. Strategically, popular support of the war was the center of gravity; operationally it was the U.S. armed forces. The Tet Offensive attacked both. Operationally, while U.S. and South Vietnamese forces suffered significant casualties (1200 and 2300 respectively) during Tet, they were not defeated militarily. They were however forced to adopt a defensive posture as they fought to recapture and hold cities overrun by the North Vietnamese. If one cannot defeat an enemy directly by destroying

his operational center of gravity outright, which Giap never believed to be possible, the goal must be to limit or prevent the strengthening of the enemy's center of gravity and eventually force him past his culminating point.

By conducting a major offensive and by having its violence shown throughout the world, Giap began eroding U.S. popular support for the war which in turn led to the cessation of both the bombing of North Vietnam and increases in troop levels. The U.S. forces had been forced beyond their culminating point.

**Strengths and vulnerabilities.** In formulating the operational design of the Tet Offensive, General Giap exploited his enemy's critical vulnerabilities while taking maximum advantage of his own critical strengths. The South Vietnamese armed forces had become a critical vulnerability on the operational level for the United States. While the U.S. had initiated efforts to arm and train South Vietnamese forces to assume a greater share of combat, the South Vietnamese were slow to respond which frustrated U.S. forces to the point where they believed it to be easier to continue doing the majority of the fighting themselves. Furthermore, U.S. forces were barely able to cover the 800 mile South Vietnamese frontier, even with five hundred thousand troops in-country. Giap recognized this as another critical vulnerability as he wrote in late 1967, "...the Americans were stretched as tight as a bowstring and could not defend the entire country."<sup>28</sup> Thus the Tet Offensive, being conducted against cities guarded predominantly by South Vietnamese forces and against U.S. forces that had been lured from the cities and coastal installations struck directly at the enemy's critical vulnerabilities.

The critical strengths of the United States from Giap's perspective were their numerically superior force and massive firepower. While it is argued that the U.S. was unsuccessfully conducting a conventional war against an unconventional enemy, by 1967 U.S. firepower was causing significant North Vietnamese casualties. Giap realized that if the U.S. forces adopted a commitment to fighting a prolonged war of attrition with the

full support of the American people, his chances of achieving his operational and strategic objectives would be slight. His execution of Tet minimized the effectiveness of the United States' forces by drawing them from the cities and coastline, away from their supplies and support bases. This provided an operational window of opportunity during which he could stage his attacks and achieve operational objectives before they returned to reinforce the fledgling ARVN forces. He also minimized the effectiveness of U.S. firepower as the bombing of North Vietnam came to a halt following Tet. The erosion of popular support for the war eliminated the possibility of the U.S. continuing to apply its massive firepower in a protracted war. Was this a fortunate gamble by Giap? Not at all. General Giap knew his enemy's operational strengths and weaknesses. His offensive demonstrated his ability to minimize the effectiveness of the former and resolve to exploit the latter. He wrote in 1967:

The Americans have believed that they could base their operations on the power of weapons, and have assumed that firepower is their soul. When the use of these bases, weapons, and firepower is limited, or fails to become increasingly effective, the tactics become ineffective and themselves fail.<sup>29</sup>

Giap continued:

Prolonged resistance is the essential strategy for a people which live in a country which is neither large nor populous, one which has a limited economic and military potential but which is determined to defeat an aggressive enemy which has large numbers of well armed troops.<sup>30</sup>

General Giap had critical operational strengths and vulnerabilities also. His strengths included his combined (NVA and Vietcong) force, popular support throughout Vietnam (moral support, shelter, supplies, intelligence), and his ability to deceive and surprise an unsuspecting enemy. Giap's ability to position supplies and troops covertly in preparation for the offensive was another critical strength. Preparation of the Saigon region for the offensive serves as an example as 100 tons of equipment were brought there by bicycle, ox cart, and sampan.<sup>31</sup> Finally, conservative employment of NVA

forces during Tet assured Giap that the strongest part of his military force would be available for the duration of the protracted conflict. He had a strong, well trained operational reserve.

General Giap had a critical operational vulnerability which nearly resulted in an unconditional loss in the offensive - command and control. It was difficult for Giap, and his subordinate commanders, to communicate with the Vietcong as they infiltrated target cities prior to the offensive. The initiation of the offensive was delayed one day by Giap. A regional command failed to receive and pass the order to delay and as a result, seven cities were attacked prematurely.<sup>32</sup> Had U.S. and South Vietnamese leadership associated these raids with the abundant indicators of a pending attack they held but chose to ignore, they would have been at least at a higher state of alert when the offensive was launched twenty four hours later.

A second critical vulnerability for General Giap and North Vietnam was the demonstrated ferocity and violence of his forces. The alleged massacre of approximately 2500 civilians during the attack on Hue serves as an example. During this battle for the symbolically important ancient capital city which raged for twenty five days, political officials, foreigners, foreign service personnel (of non-hostile nations), clergy, police, and teachers were executed, beaten to death, or buried alive by Vietcong and NVA forces.<sup>33</sup> Conduct such as this undermined Giap's objective of rallying the South Vietnamese people to revolt against their oppressive government and prevented Giap from achieving same. It also brings into question the effectiveness of his training of military discipline. Alternatively, in the case of Hue, Giap may have seen an opportunity for magnifying the shock generated by Tet through this massacre and consciously chose to pursue it at the expense of his objective of popular revolt. Giap's acute awareness of declining support of the war in the United States and his rapidly growing ability to feature his force and determination via the press, most notably television, supports the latter argument.

**Operational idea.** To this point it is clear that General Giap had a clear understanding of his operational objectives and desired end state. He also understood well his, and his enemy's, strategic and operational centers of gravity, and how to protect and attack them, respectively. His remaining operational challenge was to formulate his operational idea or scheme - the Tet Offensive. The operational methodology for defeating the enemy was developed by Giap and his subordinates in the summer of 1967. Plans were developed that identified cities and key objectives (U.S. embassy, Presidential palace, etc.), and training required for the offensive. Apportionment of forces was also decided upon as was a plan for logistics and communications.<sup>34</sup>

Phasing was the key element of the offensive. While the application of Giap's main force against his points of main attack - the cities and towns of South Vietnam began on 30 January 1968, the initial phase of the offensive actually began in October 1967. The first phase included attacks by North Vietnamese regulars on the U.S. Marine Corps base at Con Thien - launched from an NVA stronghold in Laos, and attacks on the towns of Loc Ninh and Song Be - supported from nearby Cambodia. Shortly thereafter two NVA divisions laid siege to the Marine Corps garrison at Khe Sanh. The U.S. response was exactly that which Giap sought as forces were deployed from South Vietnamese cities and coastal regions to reinforce and recapture NVA holdings. Note that these early attacks were not too far removed from North Vietnamese safe havens while they lengthened U.S. lines of communication and dispersed forces over a greater part of the country. The U.S. became particularly focused on recapturing Khe Sanh as 6000 men were deployed in the effort, as Giap had believed they would.<sup>35</sup> Giap was now poised to conduct operational maneuver against the vulnerable cities of South Vietnam.

The second phase of Tet, synchronized attacks on cities, included examples of operational deception, maneuver, and synchronization. Giap's deception lie in his launching of the offensive on the major holiday of the Vietnamese year. Although Tet

has historically been the time for initiating major military campaigns, the U.S. and South Vietnamese leadership chose to discount it as a possibility in 1968. Having captured documents, interrogated prisoners, and received intelligence indicating movement of forces, General Westmoreland firmly held that Giap would not be so bold, would not exercise military fantasy, by conducting an offensive with his small and relatively weak forces.<sup>36</sup> While some U.S. forces (e.g. Saigon) were on alert, they did not expect to see any major NVA or Vietcong activity and were essentially unprepared, as Giap had anticipated.<sup>37</sup>

The offensive was launched with an operational maneuver consisting of a series of synchronized assaults throughout South Vietnam on 30 January 1968 as follows:

<u>City</u>	<u>Time of Attack</u>	<u>Location</u>
Nha Trang	0035	central coast
Ban Me Thout	0135	central highlands
Kontum	0200	central highlands
Hoi An	0255	coastal provincial capital
Da Nang	0330	coastal city
Qui Nhon	0410	central coast
Pleiku	0440	mountain interior <sup>38</sup>

Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, center of U.S. and South Vietnamese military command and control, a city of 2.2 million, the center of commerce and luxury, and center of Southeast Asian tourism, was attacked simultaneously on eight different axis on 31 January 1968 by NVA and Vietcong forces.<sup>39</sup> In the far south, the Mekong delta - the South Vietnamese 'rice basket' was also attacked 30-31 January 1968.

Thirteen of sixteen provincial capitals were hit as quickly as South Vietnamese military leaders surrendered or fled (see map appendix A).<sup>40</sup>

Giap's Tet offensive purposely had a lack of operational branches. Giap had not planned for alternative courses of action. The perception is that this weakness eventually allowed U.S. forces to recapture the cities resulting in a military victory. Countering this perception, Giap had planned a significant sequel by holding a majority of his NVA



forces in reserve throughout the offensive. He therefore did not have the forces available for reinforcing the cities and fending off the returning U.S. troops - but Giap did not need to. His desired operational end state was to send a shock through the military, government, and people of the United States and South Vietnam - not to defeat and occupy cities. To do so would have severely weakened his forces and placed him on the defensive. Giap's operational momentum was being generated by his offensive, momentum which he was determined to maintain. Giap calculated that Tet would not be the final battle, but the beginning of the final protracted stage of a war of attrition - the sequel to Tet which required him to have an operationally strong force of North Vietnamese regulars. Giap recognized that Tet would result in significant North Vietnamese casualties, estimated to have been nearly 40,000, most of which were Vietcong. From the North Vietnamese perspective, this loss of life was not disproportionate to the ultimate achievement of objectives at all levels. Giap wrote:

Every minute hundreds of thousands of people die all over the world. The life or death of a hundred, a thousand, or tens of thousands of human beings, even if they are our own compatriots, represent very little.<sup>41</sup>

**Synthesis.** In order to evaluate General Giap's application of operational art in the Tet Offensive, four questions must be answered. First, what military conditions had to be produced in the theater of operations to achieve the strategic goal (erosion of popular support of the Vietnam War in the United States)? Giap had to send a military shock through the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces and people, a shock derived from an ambitious, surprise offensive which demonstrated North Vietnamese tenacity and resolve to continue fighting while forcing his enemy to assume a defensive posture. Giap achieved this.

Second, what sequence of actions were most likely to produce these conditions? Luring U.S. forces from their strongholds followed by an extensive series of violent attacks on cities and towns throughout South Vietnam, some of which were militarily

significant (Saigon) others symbolically significant (Hue), would achieve Giap's conditions or desired end state - shocking enemy forces and their people.

Next, did Giap possess and apply his resources properly to accomplish the desired sequence of actions? The answer again is yes as he and his advisers had developed and executed a plan which addressed phasing, movement, logistics, training, sequencing, and operational reserve. He maximized the combat efficiency of his relatively small force engaged in the offensive (approximately 67,000) by attacking operational vulnerabilities and minimizing the effectiveness of the strengths of his enemy. He held the majority of NVA forces in operational reserve for the next sequential effort - a prolonged war of attrition

Finally, did General Giap recognize the likely cost or risk in performing that sequence of actions? This was addressed by Giap on two planes. Strategically, if he did not create his shock wave, his forces would have continued fighting an enormous war machine, an enemy that was beginning to adapt to fighting an unconventional war, an enemy that could eventually defeat him. On an operational level, Giap realized that heavy casualties would be a price to pay for achieving his desired end state. While he did not disregard the lives of his forces, he was not hesitant to subject them to extreme risk in the interest of achieving his objectives.

### Conclusion

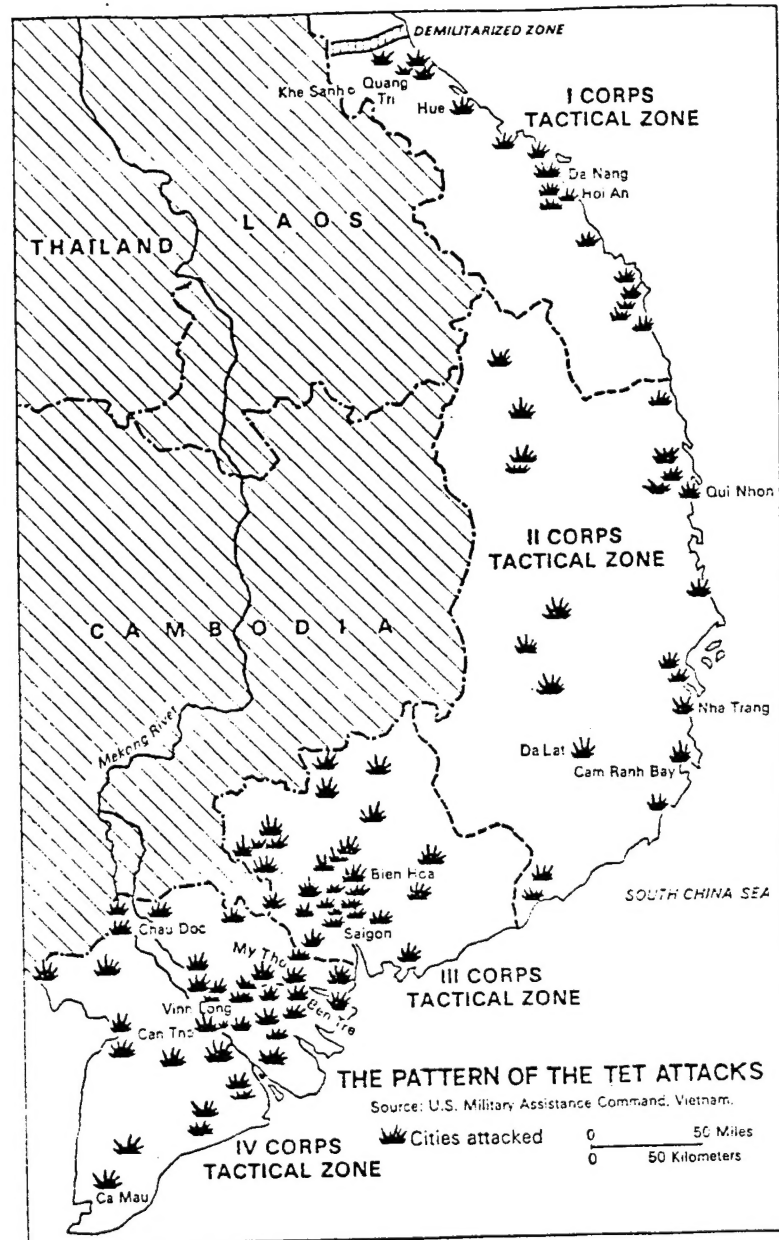
General Giap successfully applied the principles of operational art throughout the Tet Offensive. He had an operational design which addressed his, and his enemy's, centers of gravity and critical strengths and weaknesses. Giap developed an operational idea which maximized combat efficiency of his forces and executed his plan nearly flawlessly capitalizing on his operational leadership abilities and experience. Although he suffered greater casualties than his enemy and lost many tactical engagements, he achieved his operational objectives. He had weakened the armed forces of South Vietnam, highlighting their ineptness to the U.S.; U.S. pacification and Vietnamization

efforts had been interrupted; heavy casualties had been inflicted on the U.S. forcing them to adapt a defensive strategy; he had demonstrated North Vietnamese resolve and operational flexibility.

Giap failed to incite popular revolt in South Vietnam but, in light of his other achievements, this would not be critical to achieving his desired end state or strategic objective.

The shock generated by the Tet Offensive (Giap's desired operational end state) lead to the erosion of popular support of the Vietnam War in the United States (Giap's strategic objective). These achievements ultimately contributed to achieving the North Vietnamese strategic end state - an independent Vietnam. From the Vietnamese perspective, General Giap successfully applied the principles of operational art in the Tet Offensive.

## Appendix A



South Vietnam - Tet Offensive January 1968<sup>42</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Arthur D. Jackson, "General Vo-nguyen-Giap Insurgent Theorist or Leader of a People?" Naval War College Review, November 1967, 64.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 65.
- <sup>5</sup> Charles W. Alsup, "General Vo Nguyen Giap: Operational Genius or Lucky Amateur?" Unpublished Research Paper, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 1993, 9.
- <sup>6</sup> Jackson, "General Vo-nguyen-Giap," 65.
- <sup>7</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap, How We Won the War, (Philadelphia: RECON Publications, 1976), 7.
- <sup>8</sup> Jackson, "General Vo-nguyen-Giap," 65.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 67.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 69.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 68.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 70-71.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Alsup, "General Vo Nguyen Giap," 19.
- <sup>15</sup> Milan Vego, "Operational Leadership," (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, Joint Military Operations Department, 1996), 2.
- <sup>16</sup> Jackson, "General Vo-nguyen-Giap," 73.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 74.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 73.
- <sup>20</sup> Alsup, "General Vo Nguyen Giap," 27.
- <sup>21</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 249.
- <sup>22</sup> Stanley Karnow, "Giap Remembers," New York Times Magazine, 24 June 1990, 36.
- <sup>23</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap, The Military Art of People's War (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 321.
- <sup>24</sup> Karnow, "Giap Remembers" 59.
- <sup>25</sup> Don Oberdorfer, Tet! (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 330.
- <sup>26</sup> Herring 189 George C. Herring, America's Longest War, 2d ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1986), 189.

- 27 Giap, The Military Art of People's War, 301.
- 28 Karnow, "Giap Remembers," 59.
- 29 Giap, The Military Art of People's War, 300.
- 30 Ibid., 302.
- 31 Oberdorfer, Tet!, 59.
- 32 Ibid., 121.
- 33 Ibid., 232.
- 34 Ibid., 57-58.
- 35 Herring, America's Longest War, 188.
- 36 Oberdorfer, Tet!, 120.
- 37 Herring, America's Longest War, 189.
- 38 Oberdorfer, Tet!, 124.
- 39 Ibid., 134.
- 40 Ibid., 152-153.
- 41 Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam, 238.
- 42 Oberdorfer, Tet!, 123.

## Bibliography

- Alsup, Charles W. "General Vo Nguyen Giap: Operational Genius or Lucky Amateur?" Unpublished Research Paper, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 1993.
- Duiker, William J. The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1981.
- Franklin, Noble and Christopher Dowling, eds. Decisive Battles of the Twentieth Century. New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1976.
- Galloway, Joseph L. "There Are Limits On Power". U.S. News and World Report, 29 October 1990, 48.
- Giap, Vo Nguyen. The Military Art of People's War. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The South Vietnam People Will Win. Hanoi: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1965.
- Giap, Vo Nguyen and Van Tien Dung. How We Won the War. Philadelphia: RECON Publications, 1976.
- Herring, George C. America's Longest War. 2d ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1986.
- Jackson, Arthur D. "General Vo-nguyen-Giap Insurgent Theorist or Leader of a People?" Naval War College Review, November 1967, 62.
- Karnow, Stanley. "Giap Remembers." New York Times Magazine, 24 June 1990, 22-60.
- Krepinevich, Andrew F., Jr. The Army and Vietnam. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.
- Oberdorfer, Don. Tet! Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971.
- Sampson, Howard R. "A Conversation With General Giap". Army Magazine, September 1991, 47-53.
- Vego, Milan. "Operational Leadership." Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, Joint Military Operations Department, 1996.